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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL MCCONNELL

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Kabul warmly welcomes your visit.

¶2. (SBU) The coming year will take its identity from the Afghan presidential election, and from increased U.S. military deployments. We continue to face tough challenges in Afghanistan, particularly on the security and governance front. The President's Strategic Review for Afghanistan and Pakistan has delineated the way forward in Afghanistan. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Holbrooke is leading the effort to take a more integrated, regional approach here. Conditions remain more nuanced than the negative drumbeat often coming from the media. Advances in security do not grab headlines the way a spectacular suicide attack does. Progress in development continues. National and international will is holding, but poor governance and corruption are corrosive problems. The Afghan response to President Obama's strategy for Afghanistan has been overwhelmingly positive, including a strong public endorsement from Karzai. This suggests that he too is looking to turn the page on the period of disagreement and growing tensions in our relationship.

Elections  
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¶3. (SBU) The August 20 presidential election continues to color every aspect of political life here. Karzai's popularity has fallen - dramatically in some areas and among some constituencies. But overall the Asia Foundation poll found that 66 percent of the population still thought the national government was doing a "very good" or "somewhat good" job (compared to 80 percent in 2007). In our view, it is Karzai's election to lose so long as political opposition leaders continue to quarrel among themselves and fail to unite behind a credible opposition candidate. Opposition coalition United Front has signaled Dr. Abdullah Abdullah will be its candidate, but has not yet made an official announcement - reportedly due to ongoing internal discussions aimed at securing broader UF support for an Abdullah candidacy. Insecurity and corruption are the President's greatest vulnerabilities. Karzai installed Interior Minister Atmar in October 2008 to turn up the heat on both problems. Atmar is working hard, but time is too short for dramatic improvement before elections.

¶4. (SBU) An expected rise in insecurity in the south during elections is prompting some - including Karzai, other Pashtuns and some RC-South partners - to raise the specter of Pashtun disenfranchisement and possible illegitimacy of the vote. Predicted disruptions of voter registration, however, did not take place, even in the south and we are confident that voting itself will go forward, not least because of the arrival of additional U.S. combat brigades and the growth of the Afghan army at more than 2500 troops per month. We expect some election violence, however.

Debate Over Transitional Authority  
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¶5. (SBU) The earlier election date debate has been resolved.

The opposition now has shifted its focus to challenging the legitimacy of Karzai remaining in office beyond May 22, the date on which his term expires under the Afghan constitution.

The issue is executive authority following May 22 and through August 20 to the inauguration of the next president. Opposition leaders' claims that they are motivated by constitutional concerns ring hollow given their alternatives are equally extra-constitutional. However, there is genuine concern among some Afghans and the international community that Karzai will use his office inappropriately to leverage support for his re-election. We recognize this concern, but believe it is important for Afghanistan to maintain continuity of leadership throughout this period, especially during the summer fighting season and in the lead-up to elections. We have therefore encouraged the opposition to focus its efforts on successful elections rather than on political posturing. At the same time, we have asked Karzai to publicly support the principles of a level-playing field for all candidates.

¶6. (SBU) The Supreme Court weighed into the debate March 29 issuing a statement saying the President and his two Vice Presidents should continue in office based on the principles of the Afghan constitution and sharia law, as well as the same logistical concerns that led to political consensus supporting a later election date than is prescribed in the constitution. The opposition objected to the Supreme Court statement, accusing Karzai of engineering it. The Court's comment is not binding, but does add political weight to Karzai staying in place until elections. The Department of State issued a public statement March 30 strongly supporting and welcoming the Court's statement, adding the U.S. believes

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continuity of government is critical during this period and contributes to creating stability. We expect the transitional authority issue to be resolved eventually through some political consensus in which Karzai remains in office until the election.

#### Security

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¶7. (SBU) Seventy percent of the violence continues to occur in about 10 percent of the 365 districts. Coalition and Afghan security forces have increased our area of control. The Taliban response has been a forced shift in tactics from insurgency to terrorism designed to challenge the will of Afghans and the international community. Ordinary Afghans feel less safe because of this switch, and as result of rising criminality, especially kidnappings.

¶8. (SBU) President Obama's decision to deploy 17,000 U.S. troops is concrete support of the U.S. commitment to improve Afghan security. A number of coalition partners are also increasing their troop contributions, but it's clear the U.S. will continue to provide the lion's share of international security support to Afghanistan. Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will be undermanned for the foreseeable future.

The recently-released Strategic Review contained U.S. acknowledgment that the ANSF must be expanded but it was not specific on the questions of "how much" and "how fast." Presently there are about 82,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers, 81,000 Afghan National Police, and about 59,000 international military personnel to maintain security. The ANA is growing at more than 2,500 per month and is projected to reach its currently authorized strength of 134,000 in

¶2011. The current ANP authorized strength is 82,000. International forces are expected to top 80,000 by late 2009.

We and the international community are working closely with MOI Atmar to accelerate police reform and training, develop more intelligence-based policing, significantly reduce corruption, and create vetted, specialized police units.

¶9. (SBU) We and the U.S. military are also cooperating with President Karzai's initiative to energize renewed community

responsibility for security in their locality, without re-creating local militias. The Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) is still in development stage, and will be an official ANSF organization under the Minister of Interior. In the pilot phase, district councils and local shuras nominated over 200 local - but tribally integrated - community guards per district. These candidates were vetted by the Minister of Interior and National Directorate of Security. CSTC-A and U.S. Special Forces trained the trainers and ODA SOF will provide the guards with mentoring oversight for local defense within the boundaries of the community. The first members of the Afghan Public Protection Force just graduated from training March 26. The pilot program is underway in Wardak Province.

#### Governance

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¶10. (SBU) Karzai struggles to maintain a balance between institutional and traditional informal governance, in an environment of poverty, social exhaustion, illicit power centers arising from decades of political breakdown, governmental incapacity, criminality, and insurgency. Electoral dynamics are further complicating the problem, leading Karzai to make expedient decisions on one hand, but also to appoint top-flight leaders like Atmar who seem capable of delivering police services on the other. There are no easy answers, and neither Karzai nor the international community can fight all battles all the time. That said, we will look for improved Afghan performance on the governance front with increased U.S. civilian presence and capacity building assistance from both the U.S. and other donors.

¶11. (SBU) In Kabul, the focus is on capacity building, creation of a merit-based, professional bureaucracy, and delivery of services to the public. Strong ministries include Foreign Affairs, Defense, Public Health, Education, Finance, Rural Development, and Counter-Narcotics. The Central Bank is well-led. Interior and Agriculture have new, better leadership. We work closely with those entities. We also work effectively with the other ministries, but mixed agendas or a legacy of weakness slow progress. For instance, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice suffer from the acute lack of qualified professionals, a history of judicial decision-making that combines elements of Sharia, tribal, and now Western law, and a lack of national consensus on the way forward.

¶12. (SBU) Outside Kabul, U.S. civilian and military efforts are aimed at strengthening both the Afghan central

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government's role and that of local government. We work equally with traditional leadership structures, as well as those who gained power through force or wealth during the days of conflict, but have proven themselves ready to cooperate with constitutional government and rule of law. Lack of local consensus, traditionally weak connections between the capital and localities, long-standing rivalries and distrust among communities, and the presence of illegitimate insurgent or criminal spoilers complicate the task. The goal is responsive, reliable leadership in local communities, which binds them to the capital in a reciprocal way. The Embassy working with U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) created an Integrated Civil Military Action Group (ICMAG) as a means to enhance unity of effort across all military and civilian agencies, with initial focus on Regional Command-East (RC-E). This group is now expanding its effort to RC-South as the U.S. presence increases in that region in the coming months. The ICMAG's mandate includes joint civilian-military planning assessments and operations from the national to the local level.

#### Taliban Reconciliation

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¶13. (SBU) Reconciliation with Taliban or other insurgent leaders is controversial here. Many welcome the possibility of reduced violence and instability via a possible reconciliation with the Taliban, while others (mainly non-Pashtuns, women, and certain civil society groups) fear a Pashtun deal that could come at the expense of their interests. So far, all reconciliation efforts have been premised on respect for the constitution, and no ties to Al-Qaeda, which has allowed us to support these initiatives. Although last year's Saudi attempt to begin talks about talks generated much interest, there has since been little concrete progress in that or any other initiative.

#### Narcotics: Serious Challenges Remain; Some Positive Trends

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¶14. (SBU) Poppy cultivation remains a difficult challenge, particularly addressing the nexus between narcotics traffickers and insurgents; a challenge further complicated by widespread public corruption. However, there is some good news; poppy cultivation dropped 19 percent in 2008, the first reduction since 2005. Poppy-free provinces grew from 13 to 18, or to more than half of all provinces. Three formerly major poppy cultivating provinces - Badakhshan, Balkh, and Nangarhar - have succeeded in eliminating or nearly eliminating poppy cultivation. However, the narcotics challenge continues in the south, where seven provinces now account for 98 percent of the country's opium, and trafficking is bound to the insurgency. Together with the UK, we are backing Helmand Governor Mangal's initiative to eliminate narcotics cultivation in a 100-square mile area of Helmand through an intensive information campaign, agricultural assistance, and Afghan army-protected eradication. The Afghan Police's Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) with security support from the Afghan Army's Counter Narcotics Infantry Kandak (CINK) is currently conducting eradication in Helmand province in narcotics-growing areas where there is heavy presence of anti-government forces.

#### International Community and Afghanistan

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¶15. (SBU) Relations between the government and the international community are uneven. International support is holding, as demonstrated by broad international support for the Administration's comprehensive policy and increased, closer policy consultation with key partners. There has been real improvement in bilateral relations with the Zardari government of Pakistan, although there is strong skepticism here that Zardari can ever extend control over Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus. The UN presence is strong, but SRSG Kai Eide has not yet been able to play the key coordination role hoped for, not least because of insufficient budgetary and personnel commitment from New York.

¶16. (SBU) There are often disagreements between the internationals and the Afghan government regarding issues of corruption, governance, rule of law, freedom of the press, and other areas. Internationals bridle, for example, when Karzai attributes the bulk of corruption in Afghanistan to international aid donations. The most important gap between the government and the coalition is over the issue of civilian casualties: there are efforts moving towards agreement on the balance between necessary security operations and necessary protections for civilians, including an agreement signed by General McKiernan and Afghan Minister of Defense Wardak, aiming to minimize civilian casualties through increased coordination between ANSF and coalition

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forces.

¶17. (SBU) Karzai's enthusiastic public response to the release of the President's Strategic Review marked a dramatic shift from his relentless criticism of the U.S. (and the international community) earlier this year. Karzai said he

was in full agreement with the new U.S. strategy, that it was exactly what Afghans were hoping for and had Afghanistan full support. This change in tone suggests Karzai is ready to turn the page in U.S.-Afghan relations and move past the recent period of disagreement and increased tension sparked by civilian casualties and fanned by Karzai's concerns regarding the level of support he could expect from a new U.S. administration.

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